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Tom Braden

McGovern's Zig-Zag on Briefings

SEN. GEORGE Mc-GOVERN is a little bit worried about the effect of his refusal to accept a briefing from Henry Kissinger.

McGovern's staff is worried, too. They do not want it to appear that McGovern is unwilling to listen to the facts. But neither do they want Kissinger or President Nixon to be able to criticize McGovern for campaign statements which they might allege are based on secret briefings.

It was this last reason which caused McGovern to turn down the presidential offer. If his refusal seems to evoke a negative public reaction, McGovern can still accept the Kissinger briefing. Meanwhile, he has designated Paul Warnke, formerly deputy to Clark M. Clifford, President Lyndon B. Johnson's last secretary of defense, to accept the briefing on his behalf.

Circumstances indicate, however, that McGovern underwent several changes of heart about the Kissinger briefing. Originally, McGovern accepted the invitation and a date was set in his Senate office. That had to be canceled because it was scheduled during the week when the nominee was occupied with the Eagleton affair and with choosing a new running mate. Kissinger then suggested another date and got the Warnke nomination in reply.

IT WAS President Nixon's idea that Kissinger should brief McGovern at the beginning of the campaign and that thereafter the job should be taken over by the Central Intelligence Agency director, Richard Helms. Briefings by the CIA have been given to presidential candidates not in office since 1952. In that year, CIA's Office of Current Intelligence briefed candidates Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson. In 1956, the same office briefed Stevenson. In 1960, CIA Director Allen W. Dulles personally briefed candidates Richard Nixon and John Kennedy. In 1964, Republican candidate Barry Goldwater declined to be briefed. But the pattern was restored in 1968 for both Hubert Humphrey and George Wallace though Director Helms did not carry on the Dulles precedent of doing the job himself.

McGovern's change of mind about the Kissinger briefing avoided what might have been an embarrassing confrontation. It is difficult to imagine Kissinger telling McGovern about the quantity of bombs dropped on Vietnam during a given week without provoking McGovern's sense of outrage.

The senator from South Dakota believes that the Nixon-Kissinger policy of trying to hammer North Veitnam into accepting their terms by turning the country into a bomb pit is immoral. Moreover, he thinks it will not work.
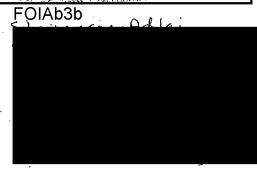
IN ADDITION, he is suspicious of Kissinger's frequent trips to Paris. He sees them as a sign of desperation. If North Vietnam has not accepted President Nixon's terms by October, McGovern thinks it possible that the President and Kissinger will soften their terms, perhaps to the point of tossing South Vietnam's President Thieu overboard. Thus the President could go before the electorate having fulfilled his promise to end the war. His terms would be McGovern's terms, camouflaged no doubt by language. In any event, such a move would destroy one of McGovern's principal campaign issues and might destroy his chance of getting elected.

So much for the way McGovern sees Kissinger. Kissinger, on the other hand, views McGovern as the man who stands beween himself and a negotiated settlement. The President's latest terms are the best that have ever been offered. Kissinger expected North Vietnam to accept them. Kissinger believes that the only reason the enemy continues to refuse them is the possibility that George McGovern will be elected and offer better terms.

McGovern and Kissinger are acquaintances who see each other occasionally in Washington. But events have made them natural enemies. Each believes that the other is dead wrong. Each believes that the other is secretly plotting his downfall. Under the circumstances, perhaps it is just as well that a formal confrontation will not take place.

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